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"YOU ARE A GOOD LISTENER"

IN the delightful story of the early life and career of Helen Hayes, written by her mother, in the form of letters to her daughter, which has been published serially in *The Saturday Evening Post*, there is an account of an interview between the young actress and Lotta Crabtree, "the famous soubrette of the forty-niners". Miss Crabtree had lost none of her wit with the passing

of the years, nor had her shrewd judgment been impaired. She told Helen Hayes that she was "a born comedienne", and then proceeded to enumerate "three great qualities" of the youthful "Bab". It isn't difficult to imagine how eagerly Miss Hayes must have waited to hear what would come next.

The first of the "great qualities" was her ability to speak distinctly, so that the people in the gallery could understand every word. The second was her beautiful natural speaking voice. The third, and most important, was that "you are a good listener". In the two months since I read it, that summary of the qualities which convinced the veteran actress that Helen Hayes was destined to great success has provided me with a lot of food for thought. The lovely natural voice and the clear enunciation are easy enough to understand; but why should the ability to be a good listener be considered a great quality for an actress? And why did Miss Crabtree say it was the most important of all?

FOR A MINISTER, TOO

UNDOUBTEDLY the ability to be a good listener is much more rare than the ability to speak well — *more rare* and much easier. Some years ago a small boy told his father, who was a minister, that he had made up

his mind to follow the parental example and become a preacher when he had grown up. "Why in the world do you want to be a preacher?" his father asked. "Because it's so much easier to talk than to listen." I am sure that's true, and I cannot help entertaining the unpleasant and unflattering suspicion that the small boy's reason for wanting to become a minister may have been a factor in the decision of at least a few grown men to enter the clerical profession.

At any rate, a minister who is not a good listener cannot be, in the full sense of the words, a great preacher; and perhaps the same thing holds true in the acting profession.

Why not? For the simple reason that a man who is not a good listener cannot hope to understand his fellow men, and without that understanding there is no chance for a man to develop into a good preacher. And as for the other parts of a minister's work — his relations with the people of his own parish, his community work, his teaching and pastoral duties — to be a good listener is absolutely indispensable. Whatever may be true of the acting profession, Miss Crabtree's judgment is wholly sound with regard to ministers.

But I have yet to hear a committee, charged with the responsibility of finding a new minister for a church, ask whether a candidate is a good listener. They almost always begin at the other end. In the list of qualifications, as I frequently

hear them set forth, the active side of a man's professional ability and experience usually predominates. Is he a good preacher, a good organizer, a good mixer, a good community worker, a good Sunday School leader, a good fellow? Apparently, energy is the first requisite; and there is a special set of words that express this basic quality — "dynamic", "drive", "go-getter", "spell-binder", even "world-beater". To be sure, there is often a slight tone of apology in the voice that uses this energetic vocabulary; but the apology doesn't conceal the underlying belief that what's wanted is a preacher with plenty of vim and vigor.

AN EXAMPLE FROM LAPLAND

ALL of which reminds me of the method of choosing a new choirmaster which was once in vogue in Lapland. In an article in "The Spur" for December, 1938, which was called to my attention by one of my colleagues who is blessed with a glorious sense of humor, the process is described as follows:

"While the candidate sits at the church organ and tries out his voice, two members of the congregation leave the church, running down the road to the point where the voice can no longer be heard. There they drive a post into the ground. The following Sunday the procedure is repeated, each time with a different candidate. The post

farthest from the church designates the new choir director."

The beautiful simplicity of this plan is obviously due to the fact that in Lapland the one requirement for a choirmaster is that his voice shall have the maximum carrying power. If by any chance the church were also interested in the general musical education of its choir director, or in his ability to use his musical knowledge in an understanding way for the enrichment of the service of worship, this particular device for selecting the successful candidate would assuredly fail. With the increase of the number of requirements for a position, the complexity of the problem rapidly multiplies; but so long as it is possible to keep the specifications within a very narrow range, the delightfully simple Lapland method will prove wholly satisfactory.

WHY NOT FOLLOW IT?

IT may be that in our highly complicated modern civilization we have departed altogether too far from the severe and rigid simplicity which the Lapps have so successfully preserved. And it is certainly not beyond the bounds of possibility that many of our modern institutions could profitably study the problem of reducing their complications so as to move in the direction so alluringly indicated by the churches of Lapland.

The requirements, for example, for the mayor of a typical American city have been permitted to develop a quite unnecessary series of complexities. It might be well for a city to cut out all the extra frills and get right down to one simple, clean-cut test of a man's fitness for the post of chief executive. For example, the ability to attend the maximum number of banquets for the purpose of making pleasant but entirely innocuous speeches might be set up as the chief requirement. A contest could be staged during which each candidate would devote a week to demonstrating his abilities in this particular direction, and strictly non-partisan umpires might be appointed to make the final decision. What would happen to the general administrative efficiency of a city that chose its mayor by this method would probably not be any worse than what would happen to the religious life of the parish which chose its choir director by the Lapp method. And the saving in terms of financial and nervous expenditure on the part of the citizens of a community would certainly be very great.

PERHAPS WE DO

TO a certain extent, I wonder whether the over-emphasis upon the active and energetic qualities in our ministers is not the result of just this natural desire to simplify the

problem. I once sat in a room with about twenty members of a Unitarian parish and persuaded them to tell me, in turn, just what each one felt was the most important qualification for the new minister they were looking for. The list that I noted down was long and utterly beyond the range of human possibilities. It would have been entirely natural for someone to have said, "Tear up that list, and get us a human dynamo. We'll take our chances on all the other qualifications."

BUT WE REALLY KNOW BETTER

AND yet, somewhere in the deeper recesses of our minds and hearts, we know perfectly well that while a good minister may be a human dynamo, this is a very unimportant fact as compared with his ability to be a good listener. After all, energy can be supplied by the laymen of a church; but the thing which we look to a minister to supply is more nearly described as quietness and understanding. What we want in our minister is not driving and restless activity, but wisdom, and the rare ability to interpret life in terms of awareness and insight. To do this, he must be gifted by God with the capacity to see, and hear, and comprehend, with a sensitiveness that most of us do not possess. He must be a man who knows how to muse, while the fire burns, until all sorts of hints and foregleams and wild

surmises play about his soul. Then, from time to time, he will have something to say to us that is really worth saying. When we listen to him, at such moments, we know that the reason why he speaks so clearly and persuasively is that he has himself been a good listener.

F. M. E.

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